



**University of
Zurich^{UZH}**

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2020

Introduction: Comparison as Social and Cultural Practice

Groth, Stefan

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-190369>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Groth, Stefan (2020). Introduction: Comparison as Social and Cultural Practice. *Cultural Analysis*, 18(1):1-4.

Introduction: Comparison as Social and Cultural Practice

Stefan Groth
University of Zurich
Switzerland

Comparisons are everyday practices used for making sense of social roles and encounters, socioeconomic transformation processes, and uncertain futures. By comparing oneself with others, practices, statuses, and worldviews are put into context and embedded in broader frames of meaning. In times of change and risk, comparisons reduce complexity and offer a clearer orientation. For a long time, the humanities and social sciences have used comparisons as methodological and analytical tools (Eggan 1954; Gingrich and Fox 2002; Schnegg 2014). Such scholarly practices of comparing have since been criticized for furthering inequalities, reproducing problematic categories, or presupposing bounded entities of comparison (i.e., “holistic cultures,” which can be compared with each other, evolutionism being a prime example). Newer approaches seek to address such problems and propose ethnographic “thick comparisons” (Scheffer and Niewöhner 2010) or a focus on “practices of comparison” (Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016a). Such scholarly forms of comparison as methodological or analytic practice—that is, how scientists or scholars (Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016b) go about comparing (from a science studies perspective)—exist besides “emic” forms of comparison (Sørensen, Marlin, and Niewöhner 2018) or “comparisons in the wild” (Amelang and Beck 2010), that is, comparison as everyday practice enacted not (only) by scientists but by virtually everybody in specific life-worlds. The articles in this special issue deal with such emic comparisons in everyday contexts.¹ Focusing on comparison not as an analytic tool but as an everyday social and cultural practice, they shed light on subjective perspectives and on what individuals (and groups) do when they compare and how they do it—from subtle to crude forms of comparison, from informal and spontaneous comparisons to institutionalized comparative regimes, from tacit modes of comparing to refined categories and systems of comparison.

With this focus, the articles aim at contributing to current debates by highlighting specific and situated practices of comparison in everyday contexts. Authors explore and tease out the limits of comparison (on epistemological and on analytic levels) and shed light on comparative practices from the perspective of European ethnology and neighboring disciplines. This special issue brings together contributions on comparisons as social and cultural practice from different fields: from the field of work in international contexts (Helena Pettersson, Katarzyna Wolanik Boström, and Magnus Öhlander), from migration and transnational spaces (Pihla Siim), from political processes on protest and climate change (Valeska Flor), and from the sphere of leisure

and recreational sport (Stefan Groth). It asks for grounding comparative practices in everyday life, for the role of comparisons in making sense of transformations and differences, and for different elements, modes, and theorizations of comparison. Contributions deal with (among other aspects) how comparisons are part of narratives, how they are mediatized in popular culture, how they consist of implicit and explicit elements, how they mediate between different worldviews and perceptions, and which material, quantitative, symbolic, or affective dimensions they have.

Although practices of comparing entail both cognitive and communicative dimensions, the articles focus on the latter as observable processes. Broadly speaking, approaches to social comparison as psychological or mental processes (Festinger 1954; Mares 2008) are outside the thematic purview of this issue. Instead, the contributions seek to connect to debates on comparisons as practices and performances (Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016a; Heintz 2010; Herzfeld 2001; M'charek 2008) observable through ethnographic approaches. While this includes forms of comparisons that are partly implicit and not always communicatively explicated, essays ask how comparisons are enacted, communicated, and negotiated: which practices can be observed, which material dimensions do they have? What effects can comparisons have in everyday situations? How are implicit dimensions of comparison connected to explicit elements and materializations?

Everyday comparisons are closely related to the production of difference or processes of distinction—phenomena so broad and encompassing that for the purpose of this issue, a definition of comparison was needed to avoid arbitrary notions. This does not mean that the articles entail declarations of how observed comparisons are different from forms of distinction, the production of differences, or juxtapositions, nor does it presuppose a narrow understanding of what comparisons are and are not. Instead, a broad working definition or understanding of comparison was agreed on to ensure a somewhat shared basis of papers and compatibility to current debates on comparison (see Heintz 2016; Scheffer and Niewöhner 2008). Essays are based on the shared understanding that comparisons entail more than one phenomenon and assume a certain degree of likeness of phenomena, such as belonging to the same or comparable category. At the same time, they observe a difference between the phenomena. This difference depends on a *tertium comparationis* as the criterium (or set of criteria) of comparison.

Contributions in this Volume

With such a minimal definition as a starting point, contributors engage with comparison as social and cultural practice in a range of different fields. In the first essay, Helena Pettersson, Katarzyna Wolanik Boström, and Magnus Öhlander show how comparisons are used by medical professionals and scholars to make sense of international mobility. Based on interviews with Swedish medical professionals and scholars in Swedish humanities, their work analyzes comparative sense-making in intercultural settings and the interplay between professional and everyday contexts. The cases discussed illustrate how comparisons feature in acculturation processes and are used

to deal with new experiences.

Pihla Maria Siim explores how Estonian families who moved to Finland make use of comparisons to situate themselves in a new environment and how they can function as strategic resources to negotiate different “modes of being-at-home.” The article looks at how implicit and explicit comparisons feature in the negotiation of identities and values and how broader social debates are mirrored in personalized comparative narratives.

In the third essay, Valeska Flor analyzes the role comparisons play in political processes, using the example of debates on climate change in Germany. Flor shows the different and layered instances of comparisons in this field and illustrates how they are used in arguing for political projects and to negotiate guilt and responsibility between different sets of actors. Specifically, the article sheds light on how language features in comparisons to differentiate between levels of plausibility and credibility: whose judgments can be trusted? Who is—or should be—allowed to decide in debates? By looking at intertwined comparisons in climate change debates, Flor renders visible the interplay of factual arguing and strategic communicative behavior as a central facet of this contested topic.

The article by Stefan Groth focuses on different elements of comparison in recreational road cycling. Based on a research project on orientations toward the middle, he shows how athletes make use of comparisons to relate to other cyclists and situate themselves and their performances in a competitive field. The essay shows how explicit reflections about performances and results, and affective and anticipatory practices affect competitive orientations of cyclists. Central to this is how knowledge and estimations about others are evaluated in different sets of comparisons and how this influences comparative constellations.

The issue concludes with a response by Dorothy Noyes. Altogether, articles offer insights into comparative constellations in specific everyday contexts. By referring to a shared but broad notion of comparison, a common ground for debate is ensured while divergent criteria and case-specific configurations are not precluded. Instead, the articles highlight the breadth of comparative constellations and their various uses and functions in specific life-worlds. This special issue and its contributions accordingly illustrate both the prevalence and importance of comparisons in the everyday.

Notes

- 1 This special issue is based on a panel on “Comparison as Social and Cultural Practice” at the Fourteenth Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) in Santiago de Compostela in 2019, jointly organized by Markus Tauschek and Stefan Groth.

Works Cited

- Amelang, Katrin, and Stefan Beck. 2010. “Comparisons in the Wild and More Disciplined Usages of an Epistemic Practice.” In *Thick Comparison: Reviving the Eth-*

- nographic Aspiration*, edited by Thomas Scheffer and Jörg Niewöhner, 155–79. Leiden: Brill.
- Deville, Joe, Michael Guggenheim, and Zuzana Hrdličková, eds. 2016a. *Practising Comparison: Logics, Relations, Collaborations*. Manchester: Mattering Press.
- . 2016b. “Same, Same but Different: Provoking Relations, Assembling the Comparator.” In *Practising Comparison: Logics, Relations, Collaborations*, edited by Joe Deville, Michael Guggenheim, and Zuzana Hrdličková, 99–129. Manchester: Mattering Press.
- Eggan, Fred. 1954. “Social Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Comparison.” *American Anthropologist* 56(5): 743–763. doi: 10.1525/aa.1954.56.5.02a00020.
- Festinger, Leon. 1954. “A Theory of Social Comparison Processes.” *Human Relations* 7(2): 117–140. doi: 10.1177/001872675400700202.
- Gingrich, Andre, and Richard G. Fox, eds. 2002. *Anthropology, by Comparison*. London: Routledge.
- Heintz, Bettina. 2010. “Numerische Differenz. Überlegungen zu einer Soziologie des (quantitativen) Vergleichs.” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 39(3): 162–181. doi: 10.1515/zfsoz-2010-0301.
- . 2016. “‘Wir Leben im Zeitalter der Vergleichung.’ Perspektiven einer Soziologie des Vergleichs.” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 45(5): 915–919. doi: 10.1515/zfsoz-2015-1018.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 2001. “Performing Comparisons: Ethnography, Globetrotting, and the Spaces of Social Knowledge.” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 57(3): 259–276. doi: 10.1086/jar.57.3.3631423.
- Mares, Marie-Louise. 2008. *Social Comparison Theory*, vol. 7. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons. doi: 10.1002/9781405186407.wbiecs054.
- M’charek, Amade. 2008. “Contrasts and Comparisons: Three Practices of Forensic Investigation.” *Comparative Sociology* 7(3): 387–412. doi: 10.1163/156913308X306672.
- Scheffer, Thomas, and Jörg Niewöhner. 2008. “Introduction.” *Comparative Sociology* 7(3): 273–285. doi: 10.1163/156913308x306627.
- , eds. 2010. *Thick Comparison: Reviving the Ethnographic Aspiration*. Leiden: Brill.
- Schnegg, Michael. 2014. “Anthropology and Comparison: Methodological Challenges and Tentative Solutions.” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 139: 55–72. doi: 10.2307/24364942.
- Sørensen, Estrid, Alison Marlin, and Jörg Niewöhner. 2018. “From Scholastic to Emic Comparison: Generating Comparability and Handling Difference in Ethnographic Research.” In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, edited by Uwe Flick, 148–63. London: Sage.